Journal Article Review:

Literacy and Comic Books

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David N. Rapp’s journal article, “Comic books’ latest twist: Enhancing literacy instruction,” is directed toward teachers and focuses on enhancing literacy for struggling or disaffected readers through the implementation of graphic novels. The acquisition of vital literary skills is often non-applicable through formal settings due to lack of interest or non-comprehendible connections made between texts and understanding. The need to broaden classroom materials, according to Rapp, is a necessity in order to encourage students to have a lifelong love of reading (Rapp, 64). Rapp suggests, in his article, that comic books and graphic novels teach literacy skills and critical thinking in ways that other formats cannot (64).

Rapp begins his article addressing the problem of literacy through the dissection of formal settings, stating that the texts and classic works of literature usually chosen to develop student literacy sometimes “fail to sufficiently motivate [students]” and “seem unduly restrictive” in terms of life skill transfer (64). Several practices can help students transfer skills beyond the written word, such as using television and movies to integrate text and visual information in order to build meaning and make connections “among diverse information sources” (64). In the same manner, comic books and graphic novels have recently become a means to enhance literacy for they address the core practices of comprehension, inference, and critical thinking. Instead of passively attaining information through an insipid text, a comic book or graphic novel keeps a student actively engaged in the reading experience, simultaneously keeping a student intrigued while strengthening the above core practices.

Innovative ways to develop literacy skills needed for all subject matters, but essential in the Language Arts field. As mentioned previously, students may not connect to the core reading curriculum prearranged by a formal school setting. This may deal with several factors including, but not limited to, lack of interest or insufficient reading ability or literacy skills. In this manner, graphic novels and comic books provide English teachers with a way to continue to teach literacy skills alongside the curriculum. Several graphic novels have the exact same text as the original novel but are accompanied by pictures, which give students two ways to gain understanding. These graphic novels can actually replace the original novel and students will attain the same information needed to complete assessment of knowledge. Other graphic novels simplify the text to get the main aspects and themes across to the reader. These graphic novels can be read before or alongside the reading of the original novel to gain a deeper understanding of confusing thematic devices. *Beowulf*, for instance, is written in Old English, which can be difficult even for the most advanced reader. The graphic novel version retells the story in Modern English and captures the underlying grim tone of the novel in representative pictures. The literacy skill of critical thinking can also be attained through implementation of graphic novels in the English classroom. Readers of comics and graphic novels have to evaluate cultural context, story innovations, and character development throughout the reading experience. Graphic novels and comics may also mimic literary classics in the sense of an ambiguous conclusion, which allows students to consider what will happen to characters after a story ends (66). Many of these skills, once developed, can be transferred to original textual formats and even other subject matters.

As far as technology is concerned, there are numerous online interactive comic strip makers that allow students to create their own comic strip. This can be beneficial in assessing student understanding of theme and content. Students can be asked to create, individually or in groups, a comic strip that illustrates a theme, scene or literary device utilized in a novel or text previously read. This activity uses higher-order thinking skills and gives students an alternative means to formal assessment. Students can also create an original work using these interactive programs, which provides a way for students think critically about writing. Students can use panels to create or outline their own stories in a format that allows them to practice their creative skills as they produce cohesive event descriptions and explanations. Some comic books and graphic novels are also available online to be read, which may be easier for some students to use and may be more cost efficient. Having a comic book attainable online also enables students with special needs to have the option to use text to speech programs.

Rapp mentions his findings and conclusions in relevance to two major studies he and his colleagues conducted. Rapp does not define any terms, and the references that are given are in regard to his colleagues that helped conduct his studies, the need for innovative literacy techniques according to the National Council of Teachers of English and the National Association for Media Literacy Education, and the benefits of graphic novel reading according to McCloud, and Bitz. Rapp states that, “comprehending comics require integration of text and pictures, presented simultaneously, to account for ideas and events depicted in panels,” which is beneficial for conveying literary sequences (64). Rapp and his colleagues tested this objective by giving college students simple procedures with instructions that either only contained text, only pictures, or a combination of pictures and texts. Brunye, Taylor, Rapp, and Spiro found that most students were successful at learning and re-creating the procedures through text and picture combinations because they offered a visual and verbal description during each step of the procedure, and like comics, “conveyed sequential events that needed to be considered together to understand what they meant” (65). Literacy also involves one’s ability to interpret and create new ideas. Rapp discloses that, “comics, as part of their structure, can’t depict everything and thus require students to draw inferences” (65). In another set of experiments conducted alongside Kopp and Magliano, Rapp asked students to view an action sequence comprised of three panels that included a beginning, middle, and an end. Before presenting a sequence to a student, Rapp and his colleagues would remove one of the three panels to assess if a reader would fill in any undepicted information. After reading these panels of stories, students were shown individual panels and asked whether they had seen them during reading. Rapp and his colleagues found that students often said they were familiar with a panel that they had never before seen, which meant that students inferred the missing event as they read the stories. Rapp states that reading a comic “requires, and perhaps encourages, substantial cognitive work that exemplifies the types of literacy skills necessary for comprehension” (65). The conclusion of the study indicated that readers are constantly constructing inferences as they attempt to understand story events, which are procedures mirrored by comics.

In his journal article, Rapp only displays two pictures. The first is the cover of the graphic novel, *Beowulf*, which serves as a visual example of a common novel read in formal settings made into a graphic novel. The second picture is of a teacher reading a graphic novel alongside her three students. The purpose of this picture, I believe, is to show the inherent interest of students in the graphic novel and to demonstrate that graphic novels can help all students non-dependent upon reading ability. The areas of recommendation for further study come in the form of implementation challenges. Rapp mentions that the integration of comics into literacy curricula can present a variety of challenges. The first challenge is how to attain the comic materials themselves, for it may be costly to attain the comics in paper format. A majority of teachers end up spending their own money to gather graphic novels for their classes (66). A second challenge is to find graphic novels that tie into the curriculum and which are the most appropriate out of the enormous number of published comics (66). The final challenge is the lack of study guides or course resources that go alongside graphic novels, leaving a teacher to develop their own materials with comic-based literacy coursework (66).

There are numerous ways I can apply what I learned from this article into my future classroom. The first of which would be to allow students to read graphic novel versions of novels instead of, or alongside, the original version to ensure better comprehension. I would also allow students to choose an age appropriate graphic novel to read if there is an independent reading assignment. The second way I would integrate what I learned is by using an interactive comic strip maker to assess for understanding. I would either have students create comic strips individually or collaboratively. If I choose collaboratively, I would break students down into groups of four and assign a text read previously in class. Students would then create a comic strip about the main events of the novel/text. They would have the option to keep the main aspects in the same place/time period of the novel, or choose to tell the story in modern time, in the past or in a different world (sci-fi or fantasy related). The idea would be to be creative with the comic while trying to understand the important aspects of the book previously read. Each student would have a role in the creation of the comic: Writer (comes up with the dialogue); Artist (rearranges the comic in the program); Editor (the person that reads the story for errors as well as helps the creative team find direction for telling the story); Editor-in-chief (the boss who will present the final comic to the rest of the class and explain the overall concept of the group). The purpose of this activity would be to mend the gap between multiple intelligences. Students may have a difficult time reiterating the important details from a novel/text via a paper or class discussion. The creation of a comic then becomes a visual and collaborative effort that can help students gain interest and make important connections as the article suggests. The third way that I would integrate what I learned from the article is to allow students to use the interactive comic strip maker to create their own story, which helps them work on their writing and outlining skills.

In the end, Rapp’s journal article, “Comic books’ latest twist: Enhancing literacy instruction,” tackles the issues surrounding literacy and suggests a modern solution that is the integration of comic books and graphic novels in the classroom. He explains the benefits of graphic novels, which are to strengthen students’ ability to comprehend, infer, and critically think while simultaneously actively engaging students’ interest. Interactive comic strip makers can also help assess for understanding and reinforce writing skills. Graphic novels and comic books can ultimately help redefine the way that students “acquire literacy skills for understanding, thinking about, and using information garnered from what they read” (64).

Works Cited

Rapp, D. N. (2011). Comic books’ latest twist: Enhancing literacy instruction. *Phi Delta Kappan*, *93*(4), p64-67. Retrieved from <http://web.ebscohost.com.holyfamily.idm.oclc.org/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=40d66> 6f7-f5eb-4146-81a2-ddf47a1d0e1c@sessionmgr111&vid=6&hid=114